Cyber Skepticism

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Cyber skepticism

Let's press the pause button on virtual schools and consider whether they will really deliver a quality education to students.

Many in the world of education have become enamored with the promise of online learning. At the college level, enthusiasm has primarily been channeled into talk about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which boosters say will democratize higher education. At the K-12 level, advocates of online learning have outlined an even more radical vision. Rather than supplementing the work of traditional brick-and-mortar schools, they see online education replacing neighborhood schools. And they're making inroads. Most states have set up virtual schools. The largest of them — the Florida Virtual School — enrolled about 150,000 students in the 2011-12 school year.

Advocates of virtual schools make some compelling arguments. One is that students who take courses online can learn at their own pace and customize their curricular experiences. Another — even more compelling to an equity advocate like myself — is that geography should not be destiny. Students who live in low-income urban neighborhoods or small rural communities, they argue, should not be denied access to great teachers and rigorous courses. That is absolutely true.

Nevertheless, I oppose virtual schools for two reasons.

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First, virtual schools do very little of what we want schools to do. They may be good at helping students acquire content knowledge (though I use the word "may" intentionally). But I remain unconvinced about the degree to which students, alone in front of computer monitors, can truly learn. I'm skeptical of a virtual school's capacity to spark an intellectual journey or to promote a love of learning. I'm skeptical about the capacity of such schools to foster moral development, promote empathy, and move young people beyond their own self-interest. I'm skeptical about what will happen to students without a teacher who can see the look of hunger or fear in their faces or that they simply need to talk. I'm skeptical about what will happen to our young artists and athletes and musicians. In short, I'm skeptical about the degree to which such schools embody the humane vision of education that lies, often unarticulated, at the core of our collective national consciousness.

Second, virtual schools provide easy cover for inequality. Because virtual schools won't be tied to particular communities, we'll have fewer visible signs of injustice like blighted buildings, racially homogenous student bodies, and

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concentrated dropout rates. That would be fine if virtual schools promised educational equality. Yet I believe that students at virtual schools will be getting a lesser education than their more privileged peers at brick-and-mortar schools. As a result, students will be the victims of an invisible injustice that will simply draw less attention. This will make it harder to advocate for better schools in poor neighborhoods. But it will also make it harder to advocate for broader social justice efforts. Educational inequality, after all, has been the primary lever for social justice action in the last several decades. For whatever reason, joblessness, inadequate access to healthcare, and even malnutrition rates among the poor have failed to generate the attention that education has. And so I fear what will happen when we take away the symbol, but not the underlying problem of educational inequity.

Let me be clear: I don't believe that online education is inherently bad. It is a tool, and like all tools, its value depends on its use. In fact, there is some reason to think that hybridizing schools with online education — as the Rocketship network of charter schools does — may have some merit. But I do believe that we need to proceed slowly with regard to online education. We need to be critical of it in spite of our tendency to fetishize anything that uses technology. And we need to be aware that it has the potential to promote inequity, even if much of its stated promise indicates otherwise. **K**